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ABSTRACT

The relative isolation of the elementary school counselor from other professional counselors is identified as a major supervisory difficulty. The potential of self-initiated supervision is offered as a reasonable method of dealing with such isolation. A list of possible self-supervisory activities is included to help counselors prevent burnout, along with suggestions for using the Morrill, Oetting and Hurst assessment model. Models for self-supervision, skill development, and self-assessment with the individual as a target are provided, as well as a self assessment worksheet targeting the associational group, primary group and community or institution. (Author/JAC)

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Self-Supervision for Elementary School Counselors

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Abstract

The relative isolation of the elementary school counselor from other professional counselors creates major supervisory difficulties. The potential of self-initiated supervision appears to be a reasonable method of dealing with such isolation. This paper describes how an elementary counselor can prevent burnout on the job by self-assessment and self-supervision. A list of possible self-supervisory activities is included.

Self-Supervision for Elementary School Counselors

Counselor supervision is crucial to the long term effectiveness of a counseling program. Boyd (1978) has suggested three main purposes for counselor supervision:

1. facilitation of the counselor's personal and professional development.
2. promotion of counselor competencies, and
3. promotion of accountable counseling and guidance services and programs. (p. 10)

There is little evidence in the literature, however, that school counselors benefit from services intended to meet these purposes. "Supervision" offered to counselors through their school systems is too often an activity more accurately labeled administration (Boyd & Walter, 1975).

If adequate supervision is in short supply for school counselors in general, it must be a rare commodity indeed for counselors at the elementary level. Secondary school counselors frequently have opportunities to share ideas or engage in more formal varieties of peer supervision. Unfortunately, many elementary school counselors, particularly those in small school districts, find themselves as the only counselor at their level in the school system. This "one-of-a-kind" status, combined with their unique preventive/developmental orientation, tends to isolate them from meaningful opportunities for peer supervision.

Before we hang our heads in woe over the plight of elementary counselors, however, we must remind ourselves of these individuals' resourcefulness. If they can commute between several school buildings, persuade the superintendent to buy toys for play media counseling, and decorate boiler rooms to look like counseling

offices, surely elementary school counselors can handle the "missing supervisor dilemma." Their increasingly productive work without supervision suggests that they are, in fact, handling the problem as they deal with most other problems--on their own. (We may be preaching the values of self-supervision, but we lay no claim on having invented it!)

Self-supervision is a self-initiated activity intended to serve any of the three purposes suggested by Boyd: personal or professional development, program development, or improved counseling competency. Figure 1 is a pictorial model of our understanding of the self-supervision process. Initially, the model requires self-assessment. Once this assessment process has determined the direction of needed change, the self-action part of the model involves attempts at direct change. These action steps include a combination of changing the environment and changing the consequences of certain behaviors. The evaluation of the action steps provides feedback to subsequent self-assessment. Thus, the self-supervision process is an on-going one without a clear beginning or ending point. The remainder of this paper will offer elementary school counselors new ideas on implementing this self-supervision model.

Assessment of Performance

The initial step in a self-supervisory approach is self-assessment. What am I, as an elementary counselor, doing poorly, doing well, or doing not at all? One assessment difficulty for elementary counselors is that their role can be viewed as encompassing so many diverse actitivies.

Over the years since the formulation of the traditional "3 C's" --counseling, consultation, and coordination (ACES-ASCA, 1969)-- elementary school counselors have accumulated a multitude of additional roles such as effective curriculum leader (Keat, 1974) and organizational consultant (Podenski & Childers, 1980). In fact, elementary counselors engage in so many diverse activities, with so many target populations, that it is difficult for them to describe their roles within an organized, systematic framework.

Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1974) provided a model for organizing counselor functioning. The model is particularly suitable as a framework for analyzing elementary school counseling activities because it allows considerable latitude for the inclusion of interventions beyond traditional one-to-one counseling. Applied to self-supervision, the "cube" (Figure 2) helps the counselor begin an assessment of self and program by providing a means to recall and categorize activities.

Figure 2

The Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst Model of the Dimensions of Counselor Functioning

Each block within the cube represents the convergence of three dimensions of counselor functioning: target, purpose, and method of intervention. Intervention is broadly defined as an activity intended to produce a change in an individual, group, or institution. Although the aim of the intervention in an elementary school is always to help individual children, the counselor may decide to accomplish the help through choosing other individuals or groups as primary targets for change.

A target of intervention may be an individual, primary group (such as a family or group of friends), associational group (such as a class or club), or institution/community (such as neighborhood or entire school). The purpose of the intervention may be remediation (overcoming a problem or failure), prevention (teaching skills or creating changes to avoid future problems), or development (enhancing functioning of healthy individuals or groups). Methods of interventions include direct service (direct professional involvement), consultation and training (teaching others to more effectively interact with clients or function in groups) and media (communications media used to extend the work of the counselor).

Using the Assessment Model

As an elementary counselor, you may wish to use Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst's model to assess yourself. Tables 1 through 4 provide worksheets for this process. In the space provided for "actual activity," list projects or types of activities in which you have engaged over the past one or two years. Next to "desired activity" list those things that would help fulfill unmet needs in the system within which you work. Ideally, this portion of the cell would include strategies designed to meet needs identified with the help of consumers of the elementary guidance program (e.g., input from an advisory council or from a formal needs assessment).

Filling in these cells provides a two-dimensional self-assessment. First, examining the pattern of activity provides a way for you to analyze your overall style of functioning and to identify areas receiving inappropriate levels of attention. Second, comparing existing work with desired activity provides a means

of improving program accountability.

For those inclined toward a more quantitative approach to analysis, adding the approximate number of clients served (or needing services) next to each activity could provide an even more refined self-assessment. Such an analysis might result in changing the configuration of the intervention. For example, suppose that a counselor discovered that s/he provided individual counseling for 50 5th-grade students with respect to interpersonal relationships over an academic year. Suppose further that a survey of needs has indicated that twice that number of 5th-graders could benefit from such help. In such a case, this counselor might consider shifting (for the sake of efficiency) to a preventive-consultative-associational group intervention with children before they reach 5th grade in the form of a classroom affective education program.

A Model of Counselor Skill Development

Given that you have finished your self-assessment on the activities you have performed and wish to perform, you are already halfway completed in your self-supervision. Perhaps the most crucial element in self-change is self-awareness (Mahoney & Thoresen, 1972). Before moving further to discuss self-supervision activities and strategies, we would like to expand on the relationship between awareness and skills development. In discussing this relationship, we will present several hypothetical individuals and describe their awareness and skill levels to illustrate the model presented in Figure 3.

Nancy Naive ("N" in Figure 3) is in her first year as an elementary school teacher. She has been in her school only a few

weeks and has yet to meet an elementary school counselor. Were we to ask Nancy what school counselors do, she might respond that they advise juniors and seniors on college selection: she has probably never heard of an elementary counselor! Since Nancy doesn't know even the definition of the elementary counselor's job, she certainly has no skills in the areas of counseling, consulting, or coordination.

Alan Aware ("A") has gone beyond Nancy by working in an elementary school with an active counselor. The counselor in Alan's school has communicated the possible services that counseling can provide for students, teachers, and parents. Alan has become aware of the elementary school counselor's job, and in the process, he has observed his school counselor performing some of the activities that define this job. By observation, Alan has learned a few of the skills that school counselors possess.

Charlie Competent ("C") had been so impressed with the potential of the elementary school counselor job that he had sought a training program leading to obtaining a masters degree in elementary school counseling. As he proceeded through his degree program, he became more and more aware of the skills he needed as a counselor. He began to tie his theoretical awareness to actual practice as he developed further skills. Interestingly, however, Charlie began to find, during his practicums in the elementary schools, that he was becoming so well practiced in the principles of the counselor's job that he no longer needed to remember quite so much theory or academics to demonstrate satisfactorily effective counseling skills. For example, Charlie no longer needed to remind himself that active listening was a skill he needed to use with kids when they were emotionally upset: he began to react with

empathy almost naturally. It seemed that he had come a long way from his first practice when he had to focus carefully on each response to maximize his empathy.

Beverly Burnout ("B") has moved too far in the cycle of skill development. After four years as an elementary school counselor with three schools as her responsibility and nearly six hundred children as potential clients, Bev feels tired and helpless and is no longer aware of the appropriate elementary counselor skills. For a time, Bev had operated her guidance program at full steam using all of her counseling skills even though she didn't need self-awareness to cue each of her actions. But somewhere in the press of all the jobs demanded of her, Bev stopped learning. By simply reacting to whatever crisis was occurring on each and every day, Bev had halted her continued awareness of new ideas and by way of a lack of stimulation, her skills began to deteriorate. She was so busy, however, that she didn't even realize she was no longer operating as effectively as she could (again, a lack of awareness). Bev is burntout as an elementary school counselor, and she vitally needs the supervision and colleagueship she has been lacking.

Sally Selfsuperviser ("S") has taken it upon herself to combat directly any potential threat to burnout. She knows that the area of most effective elementary school counselor behavior is along the highest portion of the skills axis of the model. Sally doesn't really care if she is performing her skills with awareness or without awareness as long as she continues performing effectively. Unlike Bev who continued to add activities to her schedule until she had reached saturation, Sally has been forcing herself to

employ self-awareness in evaluating her job as an elementary counselor and in limiting her attempted impact. Oftentimes, Sally has been forced to say "no" when she's been requested to perform a task not directly related to the mission of the Elementary Guidance Program. Sally has, in essense, created time for herself to learn what is new in the field (forced "awareness" which pushes her back up the awareness axis in the model). Although Sally may be no less busy than Bev is in performing her job, she is more excited about her work and more challenged because she is always trying out new ideas and new skills.

Beyond Awareness

Sally, in our example above, could have become aware of new ideas and new methods without ever taking action to change. In fact, however, she pursued her self-supervision beyond awareness into action. She tried out some of those new possibilities that she had discovered. Although we had stated earlier that self-awareness is half the battle in self-supervision, the other half is doing something with that awareness!

What action can you take right now to help move you towards self-supervision? The completion of your self-assessment, of course, is one self-awareness step that is active in-and-of itself. We have also listed below another set of possibilities which might well get you started in your own self-supervision.

Possible Self-supervisory Actions

1. Regularly attend the National Elementary and Middle School Guidance Conferences and try out some of the ideas picked up at this conference.

2. Create for yourself realistic goals and expectations for your job performance. We all know that the elementary counselor's job has so many potential aspects that we cannot possibly expect to accomplish perfection in each area.
3. Write down your realistic goals and make sure that each week you have done something to move you in the direction of your goals.
4. Include the need to develop new ideas and approaches as one of your goals. You are not being selfish when you spend time on self development: although your professional awareness time may not "look like" school work, it will keep you productive in the school over a much longer period.
5. Belong to the American Personnel and Guidance Association and the American School Counselors Association. Read those parts of the Guidepost, the Personnel and Guidance Journal, and Elementary School Guidance and Counseling that relate to you and your school.
6. Remember that even though you may be the only school counselor in the building, there are others in any school who can and would be willing to serve as "sounding boards" for your ideas and/or frustrations. Teachers, administrators, and even kids can help clarify issues and provide possible solutions. It is extremely helpful to you to share your experiences and reactions even if these "substitute supervisors" don't have any suggestions for solution.
7. You can plan and implement training of teachers and administrators in listening skills. These trained school personnel can not only be more effective in dealing with kids, but they

can also be the first people you might seek out when you're feeling a need for "supervision."

8. Don't miss any opportunity to meet with elementary school counselors in nearby schools, counties, etc. Sharing of difficulties can often lead to a reformulation of a problem that you'd not likely have discovered otherwise.
9. Consider getting more volunteer help from parents and community residents. You may be overworked when there are people around who'd be willing to help.
10. You'll need to forgive us for being trendy, but you can help your self-supervision by increasing your exercise. Engaging in any activity that will make you physically tired can help you to sort out the critical elements of a job. Physical exercise gives your mind a rest and somehow seems to allow new perspectives on issues to occur.
11. Make audio or videorecordings of your counseling, consulting, and classroom guidance activities and review these carefully. Ask yourself such questions as: "How was I feeling?" "What was the consultee thinking?" "What might I have done differently to stimulate that class?" Certainly, these same tapes could be played for others in the school for their reactions. (Once again, do not discount the potential helpful ideas you can obtain from the students.)
12. Develop some new skills in areas that you may not have been trained. New learning, of course, can occur through classes at the local university, readings in books obtained at a bookstore, or attendance at workshops designed to develop new skills. There are endless areas of possible relevance, but

one that often is mentioned is time management.

13. Arrange your day at work so that the rewarding and unrewarding aspects of the position are alternated.

14. Arrange your vacation times in advance and be sure you take them! Plan a weekend from time to time to spend just relaxing--maybe at a local hotel or motel or at a nearby resort.

15. Try yourself out in a new setting. Spend some time during the summer or one evening a week doing volunteer counseling work at a local social service agency. You will be likely to pick up some new skills, meet other professionals with fresh perspectives, and participate in peer supervision.

16. Monitor yourself closely. Are you tired? Hopeless? Washed out? If so, do something to change the situation! Use one of the fifteen suggestions above or one of your own ideas, but do take action!

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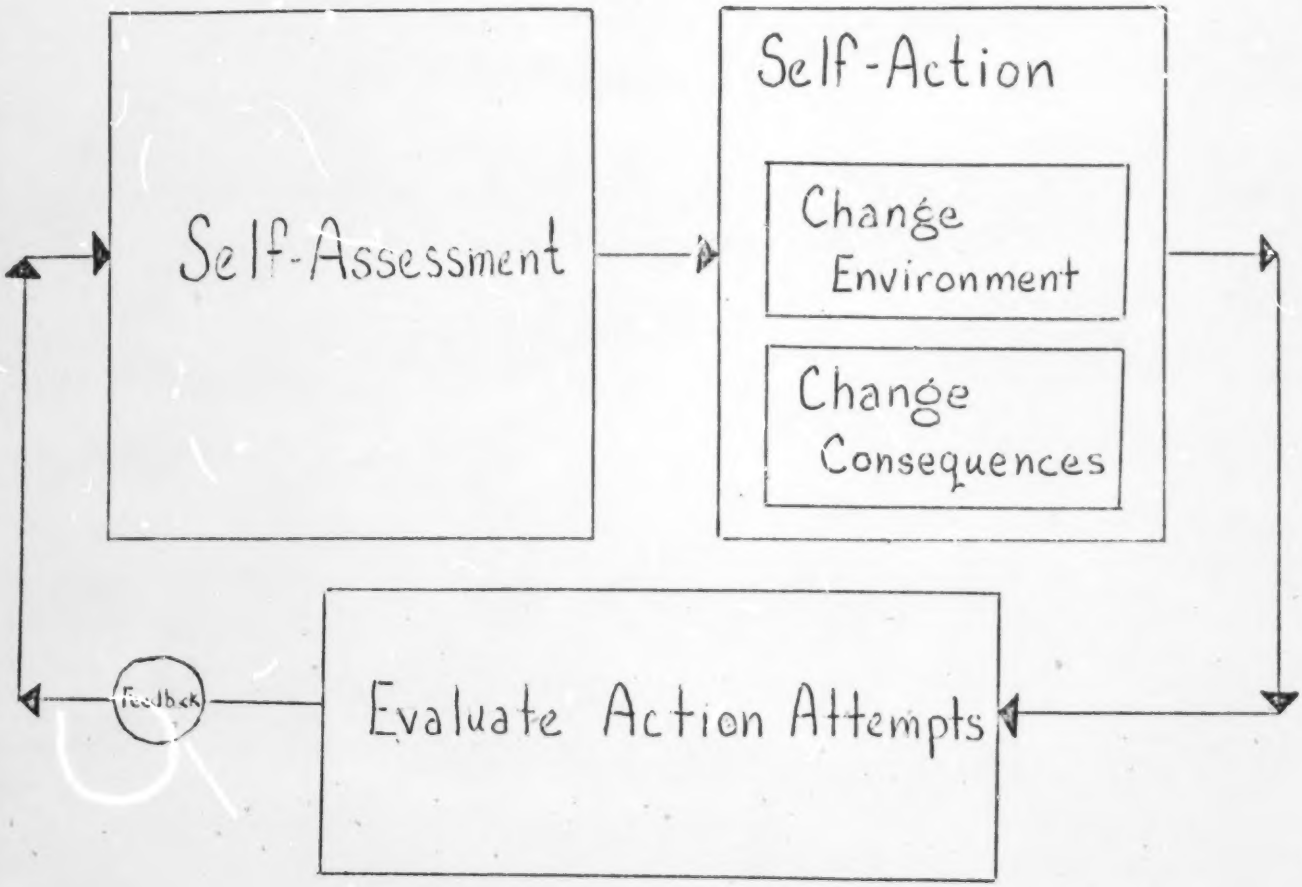

Figure 1. A Model for Self-Supervision.

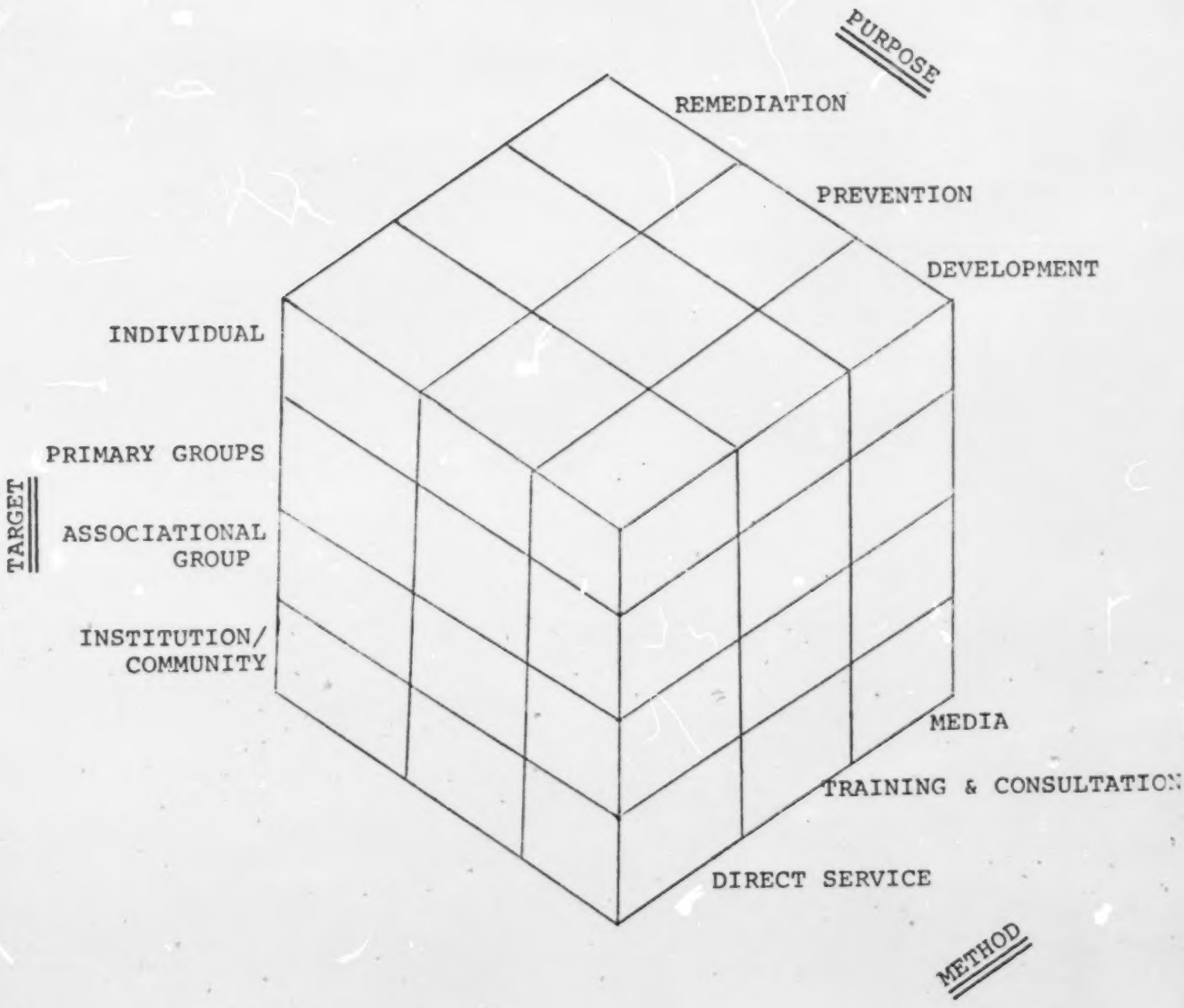

Figure 2. The Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst Model for the Dimensions of Counselor Functioning.

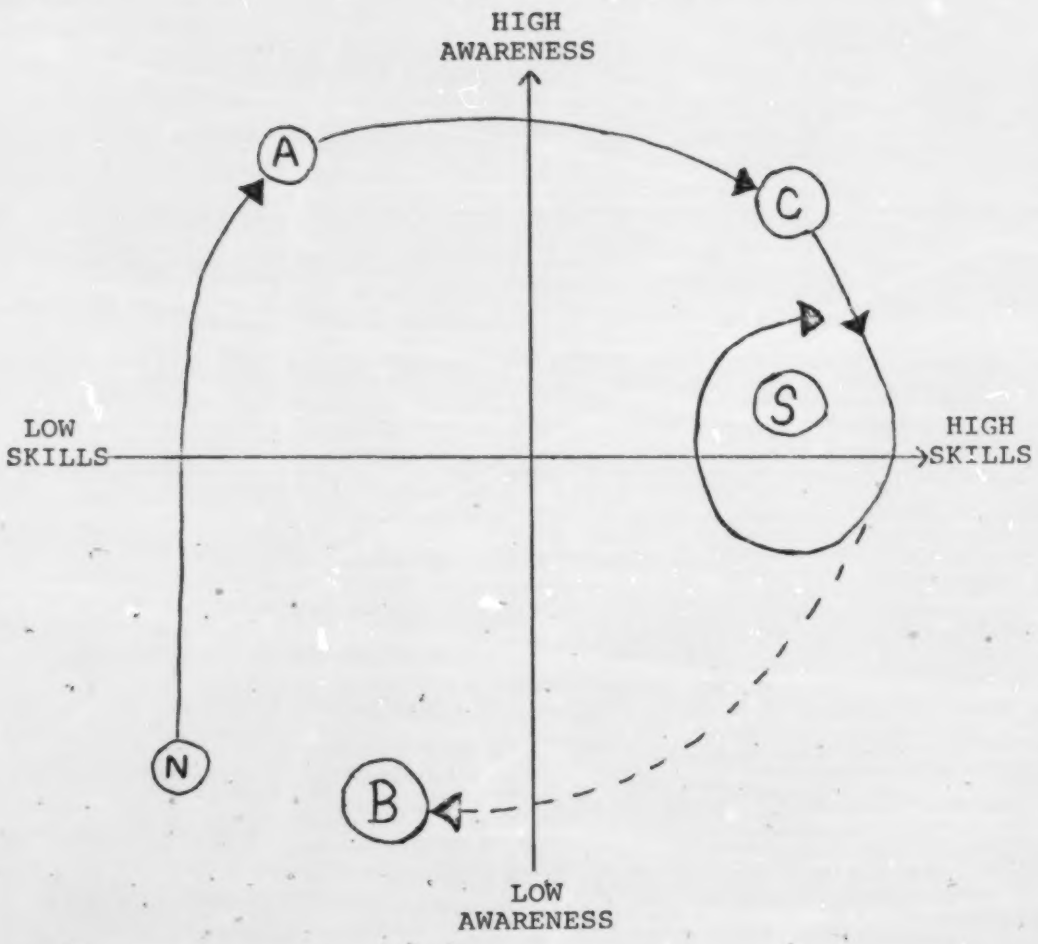

Figure 3. A Model of the Skill Development of an Elementary Counselor.

Table 1. Self-assessment worksheet with INDIVIDUAL as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL	used videotapes (social skills modeling)	slide show to orient new students	arranged for "Self, Inc." TV show to be scheduled
	DESIRED	get books on divorce for parents and children	get filmstrip on study skills/habits	begin a student newspaper to publish: poems, essays, achievements, good news about people
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL	Consulting with teachers: 1) classroom behavior 2) student motivation 3) student attendance	trained teachers to conduct personal interviews with students to identify potential problems	arrange a workshop for teachers: "self-awareness activities for classroom",
	DESIRED	consult with administrators: 1) communication skills with children 2) Glasser's approach to "discipline"		persuade librarian to order books on developmental issues (teach him/her to use AGS Bookfinder for that purpose), show teachers how to assess student's interests
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL	Counseling with students: 1) problems with peers 2) educational issues 3) new students' adjustment 4) family crisis	Interviewed new students and provided orientation	
	DESIRED		talk with students before they are placed in special programs - help anticipate & plan for problems	

Table 2. Self-assessment worksheet with ASSOCIATIONAL GROUP as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL		produced videotape of productive & non-productive classroom work groups	
	DESIRED	get filmstrip showing students how to resolve conflicts.		
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL		helped teachers use sociometric techniques to assign students to work groups	C-group for teachers helped a teacher develop a unit on "leadership" for a social studies class
	DESIRED	train teachers to conduct classroom meetings to resolve problems		begin to consult with some teachers on developing effective groups in the classroom
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED	lead classroom meeting as model for teacher		In a classroom, demonstrate use of survey feedback for group development

Table 1. Self-assessment worksheet with INDIVIDUAL as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			

Table 2. Self-assessment worksheet with ASSOCIATIONAL GROUP as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			

Table 3. Self-assessment worksheet with PRIMARY GROUP as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			

Table 3. Self-assessment worksheet with COMMUNITY/INSTITUTION as target.

		REMEDIATION	PREVENTION	DEVELOPMENT
MEDIA	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
CONSULTATION & TRAINING	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			
DIRECT SERVICE	ACTUAL			
	DESIRED			